

The News Tribune (Washington)  
June 27, 2005

### **CAFTA: Good for State, Nation, Central America**

U.S. Rep. Norm Dicks can be one very gutsy lawmaker.

Nearly all the other Democrats in the House of Representatives – plus a disappointing number of Republicans – have come out in opposition to the Central American Free Trade Agreement.

Not Dicks. He recognizes that enacting CAFTA is the right thing to do, both for the country and for this trade-dependent state.

But it's far from clear that he will be joined by enough lawmakers to secure the approval of CAFTA, which would ease trade barriers between the United States and six Central American nations. It would be a shame if the treaty ultimately failed to win approval.

The U.S. textile, sugar and tool-making industries are fighting CAFTA for the sake of old-fashioned protectionism: They simply don't want to compete with the likes of Nicaragua and Costa Rica.

But Congress has shown itself capable of rising above protectionism. CAFTA is in danger chiefly because it is being used politically as a proxy for other things: anxieties about globalization in general as well as organized labor's many gripes about the Bush administration.

What's deceptive and disingenuous is the way the arguments against CAFTA are being couched in terms of protecting the very poor workers of Central America. Union leaders and their congressional allies, for example, complain about the fact that the treaty doesn't guarantee Central Americans the right to organize.

Actually, CAFTA is probably the single best thing this country could do for those workers. If markets were to expand for Central American goods, Central American labor would be worth more, paid more and treated better. Workers would gain more leverage and find it easier to unionize if their employers persisted in exploiting and abusing them.

Unions in this country have legitimate grievances against the Bush Administration, but CAFTA should not be held hostage to those complaints.

As Dicks understands, Washington has a big stake in free trade, in Latin America and elsewhere. At least one in four jobs in this state is tied to international trade. Washington farmers and software manufacturers especially stand to gain from free and fair access to Central American markets.

But the national payoff transcends commerce. This country's poverty-stricken, Central American neighbors have long been opportune targets for anti-yanqui demagogues. The United States has a vital interest in helping build a prosperous Central America that views it as a valuable trading partner.

Looking at Dicks' anti-CAFTA colleagues, you have to wonder: Is it really that hard to vote the interests of our state and nation?